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Wotton, (Sir) Henry.

# THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 44



## Sir Henry Wotton

With some General Reflections on  
Style in English Poetry

By

The Right Hon. H. H. Asquith

President, 1918

August, 1919



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## SIR HENRY WOTTON

### WITH SOME GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON STYLE IN ENGLISH POETRY<sup>1</sup>

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

First let me thank the members of the Association very heartily for having done me the honour to elect me their President in succession to a long line of eminent men of letters and of public servants. I assure you that I appreciate the distinction very highly. When I measure my own literary stock in trade, which at best is that of a somewhat threadbare amateur, with the abounding reservoir of erudition and expert knowledge of some of my predecessors in the Chair, I feel that it is becoming that I should choose a modest subject, and handle it with brevity. I propose to say a few words to you about a man who has always seemed to me to be one of the most interesting and remarkable figures, in what may be called the second rank of our English men of letters—Sir Henry Wotton. And that may possibly lead to one or two more general reflections on Style in English Poetry.

Sir Henry Wotton was born in the early years of Elizabeth, and died in the reign of Charles I before the outbreak of the Civil War. His works, the well-known *Reliquiae Wottonianae*, were published in 1651. He enjoyed in his lifetime the close friendship, and was often, as we know, the fishing companion of Izaak Walton, who not only edited the *Reliquiae*, but prefixed to it perhaps the most charming of his delightful and, in their way, unrivalled biographies. The *Life of Sir Henry Wotton* ought to be familiar, and I suppose is, to every lover of English literature. I will not do more in the first instance than just recall its bare outline to your recollection.

He was the youngest son in his own generation of a family which produced a number of men of distinction in Tudor and early Stuart times. He had great natural gifts and graces, being, as Walton tells us, 'of a choice shape, tall of stature, and of a most persuasive behaviour'. But he had many of the instincts of the vagabond, and was generally in debt. After going through Winchester and Oxford, he spent the best part of the ten years between twenty and thirty in roving about the Continent, and sometimes, as in the case of the illustrious Isaac Casaubon, in whose house he lodged at Geneva, forgetting to pay his bills. 'Time, travel and conversation', says Walton, had

<sup>1</sup> Presidential Address to the English Association, May 30, 1919.



'by this time made his company one of the delights of mankind', and he appears on his return to England to have fascinated the favourite Essex, in whose fall some years later he was very nearly involved. He made a hasty flight to France, and took refuge for some time with the Grand Duke of Tuscany in Florence. There is a strange story of his coming over from there to Scotland in disguise to reveal, and to help to frustrate, a conspiracy against the life of King James, 'then', in Walton's words, 'King of the Scots, but confidently believed by most' in England—Queen Elizabeth being near her end—to be the man upon whom the sweet trouble of kingly government would be imposed'. That confident belief was soon realized, and one of the earliest acts of the new king, who was from the first, I may remind you, a confirmed and undefeated pacifist, was to give Sir Henry—whom he had knighted—the choice of several embassies. Wotton selected Venice, and it was there, with one or two intervals, that he spent the next twenty years of his life.

On his return in 1624, by a piece of great good luck, for he was in sore pecuniary straits, and as he said himself 'the want of money wrinkled his face with care', he was nominated by the Crown to the vacant Provostship of Eton, proceeded to Deacons' orders, and spent in congenial and dignified surroundings the remainder of his days, exercising hospitality, and enjoying the companionship of friends, such as Walton, Hales, and, towards the end of his life, of Milton. It is interesting to remark that another candidate for the Provostship was Lord Bacon, then recently fallen from his high estate. The Lord Keeper Williams, the last ecclesiastic I think to hold the office of Lord Chancellor, in a letter dealing with the appointment and the candidates, writes: 'It is somewhat necessary to be a good scholar, but more to be a good husband, and a careful manager and a stayed man, which no man can be that is so much indebted as the Lord St. Albans.' Sir Henry Wotton, who had had great difficulty in raising £500 to settle himself in the College, would hardly seem to satisfy the Lord Keeper's standard. He is said to have written the epitaph on Bacon's monument at St. Albans. Anyway, he became one of the best and most successful Provosts that Eton has ever known.

It was not on the whole an eventful life, but it had one or two episodes which may be noted before we say anything of the general character of his literary work.

The first is the controversy in which he was involved during his first embassy to Venice with the notorious Jasper Scioppius. Scioppius was one of the most curious products of his age. He was born in the Palatinate, and brought up a Protestant, but was converted to



Romanism—*mirabile dictu*—by reading the Annals of Baronius. He served his adopted church in the way for which he was best fitted, by great literary facility, and a temperament of unscrupulous violence; he became in fact the most fluent and foul-mouthed controversialist of his time. He is said not even to have spared Cicero, but his favourite targets were the great contemporary men of learning, of whom by far the most illustrious were Protestants. ‘*Jesuita nullus hodie doctus . . . Casaubonus unus plus potest quam tota Societas.*’<sup>1</sup> Such was the judgement of Joseph Scaliger, and Scioppius (who had lashed the Jesuits in his time) gave himself with almost fiendish vindictiveness and malignity to the task of embittering the last years of that greatest of scholars, and most high-minded of men, by almost incredible vilifications and scurrilities. It was in vain that Scaliger, then almost on his death-bed, vindicated himself in one of the most pungent and most brilliant of his writings. The lies had got the start, and there was no overtaking them. It was another illustration of Baron’s grim aphorism: ‘*Audacter calumniare; semper aliquid haeret.*’

It must be admitted however, that this practised literary assassin found his match when he tried conclusions with Sir Henry Wotton. The story, I think, is fairly well known—perhaps it is the only thing that many people have ever heard of him—that on his way to take up his Embassy at Venice he was asked at an evening party somewhere in Germany to write a sentence in what Walton calls an ‘*Albo*’, a detestable practice which still survives in some parts of the world. Wotton was so ill-advised as to attempt a humorous definition of his own office, and he wrote the famous words: ‘*Legatus est vir bonus peregre missus ad mentiendum reipublicae causa*’—or in English: ‘An Ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.’ Somehow or other, years afterwards the ‘*Albo*’ fell into the hand of Scioppius, whose batteries were just then in action against James I, and he gleefully printed Wotton’s epigram as a specimen of the maxims professed and practised by a Protestant King and his Ambassadors. It nearly cost Sir Henry the King’s favour, but he made himself secure by composing and publishing a Latin tirade against Scioppius, written with what was then described as ‘truly classic elegance’, and rivalling in scurrility the best efforts of his traducer. Wotton was the mildest tempered and most courteous of men; and it must have been with a scholar’s reluctance that he found himself compelled to label even Scioppius with such epithets as ‘*famelicus transfuga*’—in English ‘starveling apostate’; ‘*Romanae curiae lutulentus circulator*’—‘dirty mountebank of the Roman

<sup>1</sup> *Scaligerana*, 127, 205.



Court'; and, perhaps most mordant of all, '*Semicoctus grammaticaster*'—'a half-baked little pedant'.

Another incident, which led to a much more worthy display of Wotton's literary gifts, was his making the acquaintance, and—which was the same thing—falling under the spell, of the most fascinating of all royal personages—King James's daughter, Elizabeth of Bohemia, the 'Winter Queen'. Whether Shakespeare's *Tempest* was or was not written for her wedding, it seems certain that it was performed there, and you will find some charming pages on the matter in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's book on *Shakespeare's Workmanship*.<sup>1</sup> She inspired Wotton, like so many others, with a romantic and lifelong devotion, of which some interesting illustrations are to be found in Walton's *Life*. But for our purpose it is more material to record that it was in her honour that he composed the incomparable lines 'On his Mistress, the Queen of Bohemia', which, if he had written nothing else, would give him an inevitable place even in the most fastidiously selected English anthology.

Wotton, like Andrew Marvell, wrote very little. The *Reliquiae* is a thin book in point of bulk; nearly half of it consists of letters; and it contains no more than twenty-five poems, of which ten are assigned by the editor to other writers than Wotton himself. He was a desultory, easy-going man, interested in and indeed imbued with every form of culture, and with more than a smattering of physical science. Walton has some admirable illustrations of the good-humoured and characteristic facility with which he evaded giving his opinion as to the ultimate destiny of Papists and Arminians. He was constantly taking up literary enterprises, only after a short trial to lay them aside. Walton tells us that he had proposed to himself in his young days to write a *Life of Luther* and a history of the German reformation, and during his embassies and travels accumulated a mass of materials for the work. I will give you the pleasure of listening to his biographer's own words, which are inimitable: 'But in the midst of this Reign, his late Majesty King Charles I, who knew the value of Sir Henry Wotton's pen, did, by a persuasive loving violence, to which may be added a promise of five hundred pounds a year, force him to lay Luther aside, and betake himself to write the history of England: in which he proceeded to write some short characters of a few kings, as a foundation upon which he meant to build; but for the present meant to be more large in the story of Henry VI, the founder of that College in which he then enjoyed all the worldly happiness of his present being. But

<sup>1</sup> p. 308 sq.



Sir Henry died in the midst of this undertaking; and the footsteps of his labours are not recoverable by a more than common diligence.'

It is by his poetry and his poetry alone that he still lives; some four poems and perhaps a couple of hymns. It is instructive to compare his case with that of Cowley, whose 'Elegy on Sir Henry Wotton' follows Walton's *Life*. Cowley was an infant prodigy, who had written copiously, and as well as he ever did afterwards, before he was of age. His reputation in his lifetime was enormous, rivalling and perhaps outstripping that of Milton; his poems fill a thick volume including the fragment of a portentous epic, the 'Davideis', with which I believe I am one of not many people who have attempted to grapple; and his funeral in Westminster Abbey was long remembered. Yet within sixty or seventy years of his death Pope asked, 'Who reads Cowley?' And who but literary experts and students read him now?

There are, of course, two poems by Wotton which stand out by themselves. The 'Tears wept at the grave of Sir Albertus Morton' is a dignified and pathetic performance. The hymn which he wrote on his death-bed, which I have never yet heard 'in quires and places where they sing', is worth at least two-thirds of the contents of a modern hymn-book. But it is the lines on 'Elizabeth of Bohemia'—written probably in 1619—and 'The Character of a Happy Life'—a little earlier in date—which give Wotton his immortality. Sir Sidney Lee tells us that there is a manuscript copy of the 'Happy Life' in the hand of Ben Jonson, and there is a legend that he knew the lines by heart. No wonder. What is that peculiar quality which has given these pieces their enduring power of appeal to every successive generation among the lovers of poetry? They are so familiar that I will only quote the first stanza of the one and the last stanza of the other:

'You meaner beauties of the night  
That poorly satisfie our Eyes,  
More by your number than your light,  
You common people of the skies;  
What are you when the Moon shall rise?'

'This man is freed from servile hands  
Of hope to rise or fear to fall;  
Lord of himself, though not of lands,  
And, having nothing, yet hath all.'

If I may answer my own question, I should say it is that they possess the sovereign quality of Style. Style in poetry, even more perhaps than in prose, is an art, even an artifice; it is sought out,



thought out, wrought out. It does not fetter inspiration, though you may have inspiration without it. It is both a vesture and a vehicle ; incommunicable, almost indefinable, never mistakable. It is best understood not by description or by analysis, but by illustration. Among all the Classical poets, whether Greek or Latin, Virgil is the great example. I won't trouble you with much Latin, and what I have to give I will give in the old English pronunciation which I believe is now obsolete :

‘Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt ;’<sup>1</sup>

or,

‘Di Iovis in tectis iram miserantur inanem  
amborum, et tantos mortalibus esse labores ;’<sup>2</sup>

or again,

‘Dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum  
accolet, imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.’<sup>3</sup>

What a difference is there, not only from the simplicity, the chaste economy, the severe restraint, of the greatest Greek models, but from the strained points, the almost iridescent glitter, the tumid verbiage, of even the best of the rhetorical poets of the Silver Age !

English poetry is specially rich in great masters of Style. Shakespeare was so much else that we hardly number him among them ; yet when he pleased he could excel them all. Take one or two of the simplest illustrations. Fortinbras at the end of the last scene in *Hamlet* :

‘O proud death,  
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell ;’<sup>4</sup>

or Leontes in *A Winter's Tale* :

‘Stars, stars,  
And all eyes else dead coals ;’<sup>5</sup>

or Cleopatra :

‘Give me my robe, put on my crown ; I have  
Immortal longings in me ;’<sup>6</sup>

or Othello, in a Miltonian outburst :

‘Like to the Pontic Sea  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont ;’<sup>7</sup>

or in the most perfect of all lyrics in *Cymbeline* :

‘Fear no more the heat of the sun.’<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Aen.* i. 462-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Aen.* x. 758-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Aen.* ix. 448-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Hamlet*,

V. ii.  
III. iii.

<sup>5</sup> *Winter's Tale*, V. i.  
<sup>8</sup> *Cymbeline*, IV. ii.

<sup>6</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii.

<sup>7</sup> *Othello*,



These, and they could easily be multiplied by the hundred, cannot for pure Style be surpassed.

But Shakespeare we must always leave in a class by himself. With that reservation, by far our greatest master in poetic style, in the sense in which I am now using the word, is Milton. You cannot open a page of *Paradise Lost*, or of *Lycidas*, or *Comus*; you can hardly find one of the Sonnets, which does not provide you with a wealth of examples. I will be content with one citation from what has been described by an acute and accomplished critic as 'probably the most unadorned poem in any language', *Paradise Regained*. It is singled out by Mr. Bailey in his admirable monograph on Milton, in the passage which paints the 'famous temptation' of the banquet, where the profuse luxuriance of a Roman feast is contrasted with

'that crude apple that diverted Eve'.

I quote only the last lines :

'Distant more,  
Under the trees now tripped, now solemn stood,  
Nymphs of Diana's train, and Naiades  
With fruits and flowers from Amalthea's horn,  
And ladies of the Hesperides, that seemed  
Fairer than feigned of old, or fabled since,  
Of faery damsels, met in forests wide  
By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,  
Lancelot, or Pelleas, or Pellenore.'<sup>1</sup>

'Unadorned' indeed ! Who now or ever since has adorned like that ?

I have already referred to Andrew Marvell, born fifty years later than Wotton, whose output is also relatively small, but in this particular respect of equal, if not of higher, value. Marvell also lives by six or seven poems, but they have the stamp of immortality. We have nothing finer of its kind than this :

'Nor called the gods with vulgar spite,  
To vindicate his helpless right;  
But bowed his comely head  
Down, as upon a bed ;'<sup>2</sup>

except perhaps this :

'But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.'<sup>3</sup>

Finally, before we leave the seventeenth century, you have as noble

<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Regained*, Book II, 353-61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*.

<sup>3</sup> *To his Coy Mistress*.



a specimen of the grand Style as is to be found anywhere, in the final stanza, too long to quote, of Dryden's 'Ode to the pious memory of the accomplished young lady, Mistress Anne Killigrew'.

The fashionable Style of the eighteenth century, even when practised by such a genius as Pope, is too grooved and mechanical to illustrate my particular theme; until you come to the 'Elegy' of Gray, of which it is best to say nothing except that it stands by itself. I pass by the great poets of the Revival—Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, to name the two who took up and carried on the torch—Keats and Tennyson. Parenthetically I should claim a place, even if a subsidiary place, for Walter Savage Landor:

'I strove with none, for none was worth my strife,  
Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art;  
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,  
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.'

But Keats and Tennyson have claims to the great succession which in both cases are beyond dispute. I will make only a single quotation from each. The first is from the Sonnet on 'Chapman's "Homer"':

'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
Looked at each other with a mild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.'

The other is from the opening lines of 'Ulysses':

'I am become a name;  
For always roaming with a hungry heart  
Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.'

Well, ladies and gentlemen, in these desultory reflections we have travelled a long way from Sir Henry Wotton. He was not, either as a man or as a poet, of heroic stature, or of far-reaching range. But he was an artist to the core, and in these days when to an old-fashioned ear there seems a fine, and now and again an almost arrogant, disorder in some of the outpourings of the contemporary muse, it may not be amiss to go back to the studied efforts of the masters of Poetic Style.



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